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Press briefing notes on Nicaragua

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Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: Marta Hurtado

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We are deeply concerned that Nicaragua's chances of holding free and genuine elections on 7 November are diminishing as a result of measures taken by authorities against political parties, candidates and independent journalists, which further restrict the civic and democratic space. Last February, the Human Rights Council mandated the Office to closely monitor human rights during the electoral process in Nicaragua, and we have witnessed troubling developments in recent weeks.

On 4 May, the country's National Assembly -- which is aligned with the ruling party -- passed an electoral reform that disregarded the demands of the opposition, civil society and the international community by not incorporating safeguards to guarantee the impartiality of electoral authorities. It also contains provisions that do not comply with human rights norms and standards, including restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, assembly, and political participation.

Under this reform, the authorities have in recent weeks dissolved two political parties using arguments that are contrary to international norms and standards, and without due process.

On 19 May, the authorities announced they had initiated a criminal investigation of one of the main presidential pre-candidates, Cristiana Chamorro, for alleged money laundering through the Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation. The investigation is based on the law "Against money laundering, terrorist financing and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction adopted in July 2018." This broadly-worded law has raised general concerns that it may be used to silence dissent. The allegations against Ms Chamorro include the supposed misuse of funds received from international sources. Over the past week, staff working for 12 independent media outlets have been requested to testify in the same criminal proceedings. On 20 May, the police raided the offices of the *Confidencial* media outlet run by Carlos Fernando Chamorro, Ms. Chamorro's brother, seized equipment and temporarily detained a camera operator. Presently, Ms. Chamorro faces both the prospect of a criminal conviction and of being disqualified as a candidate.

The National Police has also intensified its actions to restrict the movements of other opposition leaders.

Under these circumstances, the dissolution of political parties and the initiation of criminal investigations that could lead to the disqualification of opposition candidates, without due process, not only undermine the right to stand for election by aspiring candidates, but also the right of voters to

elect the candidates of their choice.

The continued harassment of independent media curtails the right to freedom of expression and undermines the public's right to be informed, something that is crucial in any democracy at any time, but is of paramount importance during an electoral period.

The new electoral law is the latest in a series of laws adopted by the National Assembly that unnecessarily and disproportionately restrict human rights, especially of members of civil society organizations, human rights defenders, journalists and political and social leaders.

We call on the Nicaraguan Government to cease the harassment -- including judicial harassment -- of members of the opposition and journalists.

We also call upon the authorities to fully ensure the enjoyment of the freedoms of information and expression, assembly, association, as well as the right to political participation -- all of which are essential during the electoral process, if the election itself is to be considered free and genuine.

We therefore urge the authorities to amend the electoral law through an inclusive and participatory process. The Office stands ready to provide technical cooperation to the Nicaraguan authorities to reform restrictive legislation that impinges on human rights in order to comply with international human rights norms and standards.

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